The Problems and Possibilities of the *Relational* Approach: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract	Article Info
This Special Issue Editor's introduction provides an overview of the rationale for the Issue and a summary of the papers. Importantly, it does two things: first, it locates the work in the field and in particular the absence of sustained dialogue and debate – or more specifically the logic of academic work (argument and refutation) – concerning theoretical research programs; and second, it demonstrates how journals (or other scholarly outlets/forums) can facilitate a social epistemology. In doing so, the introduction (and the Special Issue at large) identify an issue of timely relevance and provides a generative alternative that works towards overcoming (not necessarily resolving) the issue.	

Introduction

Very few research programs in educational administration and leadership have achieved at-scale reach. It is even possible to argue that in recent times there has been an absence of rigorous and robust advancement of theoretical programs in the field. This is not to deny the presence of some large scale empirical projects (e.g., the International Successful School Principalship Project) or even that some figures in the field have managed to build productive (and often very lucrative) careers. Rather, it is to say that if you read the core literatures of the academic field (e.g., major international peer reviewed journals), there is the distinct absence of major theoretically driven research programs. There are different research communities (e.g., the social critical, the effective/successful leaders/ship, and so on), but there are not many individuals or groups of academics developing at-scale coherent research program. Again, this is not a total dismissal of their existence, just that they are insignificant in number compared to the countless proliferation of empirical work in the field. While the history of educational administration and leadership can speak of the Theory Movement of the mid-20th century, Thomas Barr Greenfield's humanist science (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993), Richard Bates' Critical Theory of Educational Administration and Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakomski's (1991, 1996, 2000) naturalistic coherentism, one would be hard pressed to name too many research programs in the contemporary academy.

One of the possible explanations for this is that insufficient space at conferences, in journals and books, and seminars is devoted to engaging with the central ideas of proposed research programs. Too often, ideas are presented in parallel monologues and papers offer new ideas without seriously engaging with con-current

developments within and beyond the field (Eacott, 2017). Despite similar claims being made by many others since the turn of the century (e.g., Blackmore, 2010; Donmoyer, 2001; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), Tony Bush (2017) rejects – not refutes, and this is a matter I will return to – this claim. In contrast, he contends that such a claim is contentious but offers no evidence to the contrary, abdicating his role to meet the burden of proof given the present of evidence to support the parallel monologues case. While it may be contested as to whether there is deliberate and intended dialogue and debate in the field, one would be stretched to find too many systematic examples of explicit engagement with ideas and evidence of the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – at many educational leadership outlets (e.g., journals, conferences, books).

This Special Issue sought to explicitly engage with this matter by presenting an overview of Scott Eacott's (2018) emerging *relational* research program and having invited scholars argue and refute / debate its core tenets. In doing so, this Special Issue would embody the social epistemology it espouses by focusing on the logic of academic work and providing an explicit forum for argument and refutation.

The *Relational* Research Program

Scott Eacott's *relational* approach offers a distinctive variant of the relational sociology project. By not fitting neatly into any one field, the *relational* approach arguably charts new territory and promotes important dialogue and debate for understanding the organization of society.

Beginning in studies of educational leadership, the *relational* approach has since been mobilized to explore supplementary

education, Indigenous epistemologies, understandings of causality, future-focused learning, digital platforms, school consolidation reforms, and principals' time use, among others. It has been central to multiple successful grants, over 45 publications, 25 conferences presentations, 10 theses, and is taught in masters and doctoral programs in Australia, Canada, and China.

It contributes to what Richard Niesche (2018) labels as the 'theory turn' in educational leadership. First explicitly articulated in *Educational Leadership Relationally* (Eacott, 2015), but with its most comprehensive explanation in *Beyond Leadership: A Relational Approach to Organizational Theory in Education* (Eacott, 2018), it has been the stimulus for a Special Issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundation* (Vol. 25 Iss. 2), and attracted commentaries from many leading scholars in the field such as Helen Gunter (2018), Fenwick English (2018), Izhar Oplatka (2016), Megan Crawford (2016), Tony Bush (2018), Gus Riveros (2016), and Dawn Wallin (2016). Book Reviews of *Beyond Leadership* have been written by Taeyeon Kim (2018), Jim Palmero (2018), Carmen Mombourquette and Leonard Sproule (2019), and with more currently in-preparation. This Special Issue continues this ongoing dialogue and debate on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* research program with contributions from Jean Pierre Elonga Mboyo, Christopher Branson and Maureen Marra, Ira Bogotch, Scott Bauer and Eleanor Su-Keene, and David Gurr. This body of work represents an emerging literature on the *relational* program and is generative of a social epistemology for advancements in educational leadership research.

To set the scene for the Special Issue and for those unfamiliar with the *relational* program, in the first paper of this issue, *Starting points for a relational approach to organizational theory: An overview*, Scott

Eacott provides an overview of the *relational* research program. In this contribution to the dialogue and debate – but also serving as the stimulus paper for other contributors – Eacott outlines the two key contributions of the work: i) a methodological framing; and ii) the theoretical resources to think relationally.

As a methodological framing, the *relational* approach is built on five extensions. These relations argue that: the centrality of organizing in the social world makes it difficult to break away from ordinary and common-sense understandings; there is a need to problematize the ways in which we think of organizing; contemporary conditions are at once constitutive of and emergent from the image of organizing; foregrounding relations enables the overcoming of orthodox analytical dualisms of structure/agency, universal/particular, and individual/collective; and in doing so, there is a generative rather than merely critical space to theorize organizing.

Mindful of other calls for relational approaches in educational leadership (e.g., Branson, Marra, Franken, & Penney, 2018; Giles, 2019), and critique from the likes of Pierpaolo Donati (2011) that many calls for relational approaches lack a theory of relations from which to base their claims, Eacott's relational approaches has three key concepts: *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. These provide the means through which to inscribe relations into description of unfolding activity in the social world.

The contribution of *Starting points for a relational approach to organizational theory* is to articulate the methodological framing and theoretical resources of the *relational* program. It was also the material that was sent to contributors to the Special Issue with their invitation

to serve as the basis from which they discussed the problems and possibilities of the *relational* for educational leadership.

A Social Epistemology

As noted earlier, as a field of knowledge production, educational administration and leadership scholars do a substantial amount of talking past one another. Knowledge frontiers in the field are highly fragmented and more often than not, siloed. These parallel monologues are a major issue for the advancement of knowledge and the establishment and sustainment of rigorous and robust research programs. Original contributions can only be made in relation to others. That is, the innovation or significance of scholarship is an act of (social) scientific distinction. This means purposely engaging with others. Importantly, calls for a social epistemology are not an attempt at knowledge centrism and instead see diversity of scholarship as a strength rather than flaw in a field. To that end, the genesis of this Special Issue was to create a space for sustained (at least in journal article length) and explicit argument and refutation of the core claims of the *relational* approach.

In *Moving forward amidst the swirls: reframing the relational approach as a step 'beyond' leadership*, Jean Pierre Elonga Mboyo acknowledges the momentum of relational theorizing but argues that more needs to be done to bolster the robustness of the *relational* approach. Rather than a refutation he re-engages with the *relational* to locate it within historical developments of educational leadership as a field of specialized knowledge. In doing so, he asks questions of the underlying generative assumptions (mostly ontological) and their relations to binary thinking before offering alternate avenues and resources to further its aims.

Christopher Branson and Maureen Marra in *Leadership as a relational phenomenon: What this means in practice* offer support for the intention of promoting a relational approach but not necessarily the one promoted by Eacott. In contrast, their paper offers what they describe as 'a far more research-informed and practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon'. This alternate draws heavily on corporate literatures to argue for a relational foundation of leadership captured in seven fundamental principles of relational leadership practice. It concludes by articulating a pathway for those wishing to work towards enhancing their relational leadership capacity.

In *New beginnings, repeated: The continuing search for educational leadership* Ira Bogotch, Scott Bauer and Eleanor Su-Keene seek not to praise or criticize Eacott's *relational* approach and instead engage in the logic of academic argument. After acknowledging their location in the USA-based field, they work with notions of leadership as contested/seductive theories, leadership as an organizing activity and leadership as praxis. Drawing on the work of Weick they offer a series of counter-examples to the *relational*. Significantly, they point out that every academic argument presents its own theoretical, communicative and practical challenges all of which often necessitate a new beginning for the ontological status of leadership.

David Gurr's *Educational leadership research: Is there a compelling reason to change?*, as the title arguably indicates, acknowledges the *relational* approach but sees no reason to abandon his current line of research. Similar to Bogotch and colleagues, Gurr notes that the *relational* asks questions of the ontological, epistemological and normative assumptions of leadership research, but he does not see merit in engaging with such matters. Instead, drawing on his own

experience from the International Successful School Principalship Project he argues that his work is worthwhile, trustworthy and appropriate and therefore sees no compelling reason to abandon it.

A Rejoinder

The final paper in this issue, *The relational approach and social epistemology in educational leadership*, is a rejoinder to Elonga Mboyo, Bogotch and colleagues, Branson and Marra, and Gurr by Eacott. While not perfectly capturing the idea of argument and refutation (by denying the contributors a chance to respond to the rejoinder – but at some point, the Special Issue has to be published), it does demonstrate how a social epistemology can (but not the only way) play out through the pages of a scholarly journal. The logic of the issue is one of putting an argument out there (Eacott), others refuting the claims and providing alternate understandings (Elonga Mboyo, Bogotch and colleagues, Branson & Marra, and Gurr) and then continuing the discussion by justifying claims in the face of critique to either strengthen them or extend/evolve and in some cases leaving them behind (Eacott).

The final product of the Special Issue therefore arguably does work on two fronts (just as does the *relational* program). As one contribution, there is the ongoing content debate about the problems and possibilities of the *relational* program. This was the primary intent of the Special Issue but as the generation of the issue unfolded it became more secondary or peripheral. The larger contribution of the Special Issue turned out to be the methodology for scholarly dialogue and debate. How it is possible to structure academic activity (e.g., editing a Special Issue – but equally relevant to a conference, book, seminar series) to move beyond parallel monologues and/or the

premature dismissal of ideas, and instead engage in the logic of academic work – argument and refutation.

Conclusion

This Special Issue set out to deliver a scholarly dialogue on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* research program. Did it deliver? The short answer is both yes and no. From a positive perspective, at face-value it did bring a diverse group of academics from various career stages and socio-geographic locations together to discuss an emerging research program. From a more robust assessment, the dialogue and debate did not live up to the potential of rigorous and robust argument and refutation. The reasons behind this are complex, and arguably worthy of a paper in their own right (at least beyond what was possible in a rejoinder). It is possible that academics working in educational leadership (or at least those accepting the invitation) are too kind to one another and instead, as with earlier claims by Robert Donmoyer (2001), and Martin Thrupp and Robert Willmott (2003), treat those with whom we disagree with benign neglect. It could also be that the field itself does not operate on the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – and therefore expecting such is outside the boundaries of field specific norms. Possibly those contributors were simply not up the task. My position, at this point, is that as a field, educational leadership does not operate on the logic of argument and refutation. There are too few examples of researchers presenting an argument and systematic refutation of claims and then a chance to respond. Our conferences are not set up in such a way and neither are our peer review processes (which essentially remain a one-way conversation). Therefore, despite the intent to advance dialogue and debate on the *relational* research

program, arguably the greatest contribution of this Special Issue is stimulating discussion about the logic of academic work in the field.

As is always the case with any scholarly activity, this Special Issue would not have come about without the support, encouragement, and assistance of many colleagues. Specifically, it is important to acknowledge the contributors to the issue. Your time and attention to engaging with the initial invitation, the stimulus paper, and then ongoing discussion is much appreciated. To the many anonymous reviewers who read the papers and provided meaningful constructive feedback, your contribution to the individual papers and the overall Special Issue is again, much appreciated. My colleagues in the Educational Leadership and Policy Research Group at UNSW Sydney, particularly Colin W. Evers and Richard Niesche, who supported and encouraged this idea despite it being published in an open access currently unranked journal during a period of increasing performative metrics. The ongoing collegiality and robust pushing of ideas is a significant, if not always recognizable, contribution to this work. Finally, it is important to thank and acknowledge the work of Kadir Beycioglu and team at The REAL. We lost a few contributions to this project along the way but the support to generate this Special Issue and most importantly the willingness to accept a proposal for an idea that is not common in the field is a testament to The REAL and how as a field we can better support rigorous and robust dialogue and debate on ideas.

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